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Blooming in the Shadows: Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974–1985

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As a small but very good show, installed salon-style in the two small gallery spaces of the China Institute, Blooming in the Shadows, 1974–1985 covers a short, mostly unrecognized period in the history of contemporary Chinese art. It begins towards the end of the Cultural Revolution and finishes in the mid 1980s, around the time new art became much bolder, due in large part to Western influences.The exhibition tells of the courage and determination of three underground groups of artists: the Wuming or No Name group, active from 1972 to 1982; the Xingxing or Star-Star association, mostly active from 1979 through 1983; and the Caocao She, the Grass Society, best known for its activities from 1975 through the mid 1980s. They can be considered culturally revolutionary simply because they wanted to paint with freedom at a time when doing so carried the risk of repression by overly zealous party officials. As a result, each of these groups was often shrouded in secrecy, painting at night or at the outskirts of cities, away from these constrictions.

Each of these associations concentrated on visual themes that challenged the political correctness in art that was part of both local and country-wide government mores. At that time, the need for secret association was genuine: nudity and abstraction, being bourgeois, were taboo; even small paintings of domestic scenes were suspect because they were apolitical. The standard of the time was the socialist realism many artists learned from Soviet art, but these three unofficial groups, whose participants were often stifled psychologically and creatively by dull industrial jobs, maintained an openness to art despite the burden of secrecy. Blooming in the Shadows is mostly a painting show, with the important exception of the sculptor Wang Keping. The paintings are small, in part because the canvases had to be hidden in satchels from prying eyes, and while the work is usually modest, it often evinces a moving tenacity and determination to keep the art of painting and sculpture alive despite the odds.

This is the first time such art has been gathered and exhibited in America, and it is the intention of Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen, the show's curators and catalogue essayists, to shed light on works that exemplify the beginning of contemporary Chinese art. As such, the exhibition is notably informative, providing the curious viewer and reader an historical overview of the art made between 1974 and 1985. Indeed, the works cited in this review, all of which were included in the show, illustrate the human

need for expression. Simply to paint without ideology was considered a political error; while the vestiges of socialist realism still exert an influence today, at that time the painting of contented workers and heroic peasants was considered the highest ideal to aspire to in painting. Thus the vision of the art addressed here can be understood as a kind of rebellion against the barbed rules of local government. While it is not, on the surface, bold, a certain heroism and tenacity does comes through even in the diminutive studies of daily life. I do not, however, want to imply that the art's value is only political; there is visual interest as well as political dissidence to be found in the exhibition's art. The pieces I have chosen to write about tend to be formally interesting if not aesthetically innovative while at the same time enacting what amounts to a silent protest against the militant regulation of the imagination.

In current Chinese culture, there is relative freedom despite the fact that political satire, especially of Mao, and nudity of a graphic sexual or pornographic kind continue to be prohibited. Otherwise, painters are more or less free to do what they want. So it is hard to imagine, even for most younger artists working in China today, what it meant to practice painting just a generation ago. In the mercantile democracies of the Western world, we can see a general malaise in art that seeks the literalism of the political sublime or is the mere illustration of theory; however, politically driven art in the West shows us how easy it is to ridicule a government for its imperial bent—and also how allowing such parody is a feature of social democracy. But in mainland China, during the period Blooming in the Shadows addresses, even a small figurative artwork was capable of bringing the government's wrath down on the artist responsible for the image. A painter's career could end in a moment if the wrong person saw the art.

The Wuming (No Name) Group, active from 1972 to 1982, came into being as a loose association of friends.[1] Born in the 1950s, they were old enough to have lived through the grim times of the Cultural Revolution. The artists—Ma Kelu, Wei Hai, Zhang Wei, Li Shan, Zheng Ziyan, her brother Zheng Zigang, Shi Xixi, and Bao Le'an—were either classmates or resided in the same apartment compound in Beijing. At a certain point, around 1972, the several small independent groups that would eventually comprise the Wuming began to coalesce. Interestingly, in contrast to the relative obscurity of women artists in Chinese art earlier in the modernist period, women formed a strong alliance with the other artists in this small society, which was broader in age range than what one might at first think—from teenagers to those in their thirties. The older artists, many of whom were teachers, mentored the younger ones, some of whom were still in high school. Inevitably, the experience for the younger painters was formative, while the older artists won a momentary sense of dignity through teaching in this way when Chinese life was under tight government control.

At this time, the kinds of works that the Wuming were making were particularly small in size and personal in content, in opposition to the

Zhang Wei, *The Hall of Supreme Harmony*, 1976, oil on paperboard, 18.7 x 25.6 cm. Courtesy of China Institute, New York.

mural-size, heavily politicized official imagery of the Chinese government. The Wuming rejected heavy-handed socialist realism in favour of often simple studies depicting what they saw in front of them—landscapes or cityscapes. As it turned out, in the absence of political and aesthetic freedom, the artists' paintings were subversive merely in that they did not carry a message. It is perhaps difficult for a Westerner to imagine a contemporary life as constrained as that which the Chinese led in the final years of the Cultural Revolution and during the period that immediately followed it. As the exhibition catalogue documents, the suffering imposed upon them was terrible—people were displaced, harassed and humiliated, even murdered. Yet it remained possible, by means of determination, for the Wuming to practice their artistic skills.

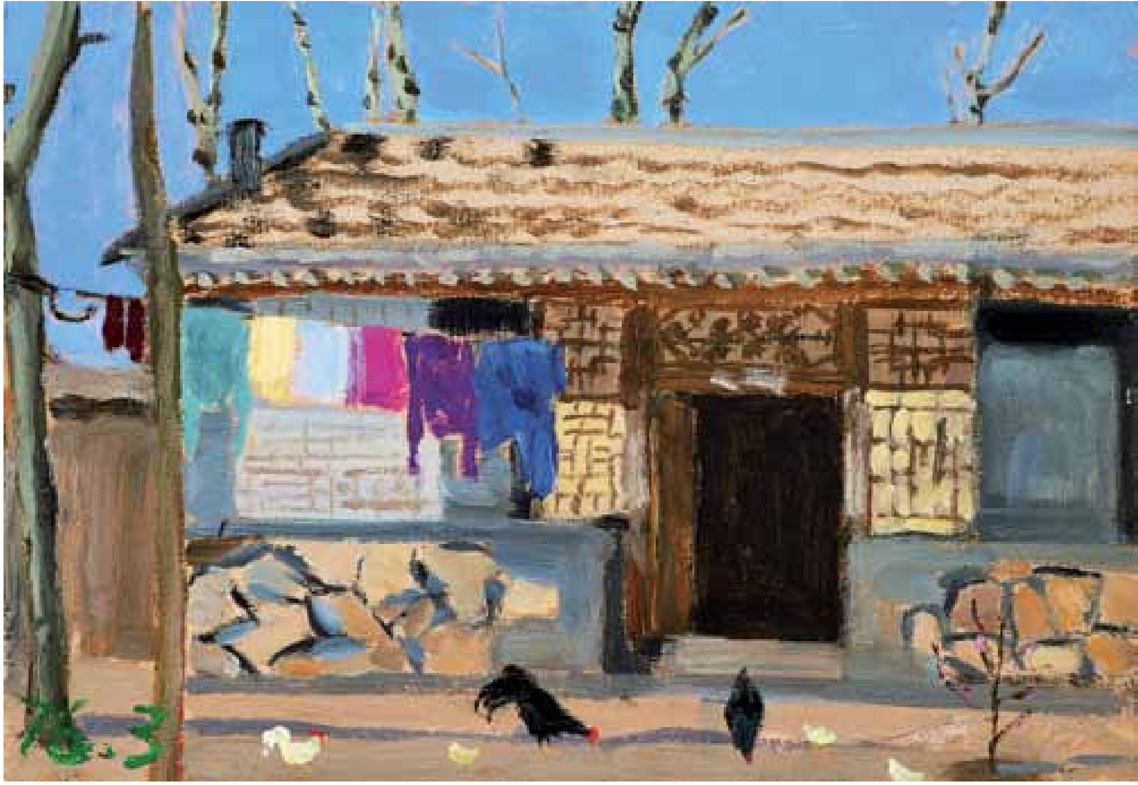
The Wuming's debt to Western cultural history was considerable. Even the materials that were often used—oil paint on paperboard—came from the West. At one point during the Cultural Revolution, the very young artists Shi Xixi and Zheng Zigang were left to fend for themselves because their parents had been sent to labour camp; they broke into a space holding many books intended for recycling, to be pulped and turned into paper. By reading what were then banned volumes that included art books, translated novels, and Western philosophy, they expanded their knowledge and interests, but this also meant taking the chance that their illegal activity might be discovered.[2] The relations engendered by this association of individuals clearly formed a necessary psychological support system during a time when reactionary left-wing politics were in full swing: as Wang Aihe commented, "In a world where spiritual life was smothered, Wuming was the spiritual home we created."[3] The pursuit of this kind of art thus had

an inevitable political turn in the sense that their independent practice of exploring the imagination would have been judged solely on political grounds by local officials and even by their neighbours.

As for the art itself, many of the paintings are works that simply describe the reality the artist observed. Given the cultural rigidity of the times, this would be an achievement in itself; however, the quality of these small works is higher than one might think. For example, the earliest painting on exhibit, a 1965 oil on paperboard titled *Yuyuantan Landscape*, is a well-composed work made by Shi Zhenyu. The scene is of a rocky cove with a broad sky above it. It is noteworthy for its horizontal brush marks detailing rocks and sand as well as the slate-blue colour of the water. As a member

Shi Zhenyu, *Yuyuantan Landscape*, 1965, oil on paperboard, 15 x 20 cm. Courtesy of China Institute, New York.

of the Wuming, Shi Zhenyu participated in the underground exhibition that took place in painter Zhang Wei's home in 1974, and, after that, in later shows, in 1979 and 1981. With the greater freedom of the reform era that gradually followed the Cultural Revolution, Shi Zhenyu was able to participate more fully in the art scene and became a professor at the Central Academy of Arts and Crafts and stayed on in the Department of Industrial Design after the school was integrated into Tsinghua University.[4] The painting might easily be dismissed as an unassuming oil sketch depicting a conventional view, but there are a number of ways in which Shi Zhenyu's landscape is original: first, working with oil constituted a decision to move away from the ink used traditionally for Chinese art; and second, the forms are compellingly handled, with a muted use of color—grey-blue for water and sky, browns for the land surrounding the water. It is not possible to effectively judge this work from a Western viewpoint, which would see it as belonging to a long, and mostly vitiated, narrative of landscape. Seen in its own right, the image becomes stirringly new.



Opposite top: Li Shan, *Dormitory*, 1976, oil on paperboard, 19.5 x 27 cm. Courtesy of China Institute, New York.

Opposite bottom: Ma Kelu, *Chrysanthemum and Blue Pot*, 1974, oil on paperboard, 39 x 31 cm. Courtesy of China Institute, New York.

Li Shan, the youngest of the Wuming group, and a woman, also made representational works. All members of the three different associations painted figuratively, with the exception of the ink painters who belonged to these groups. Li Shan has a particularly evocative study entitled *In the Rain* (1974–78), in which white flowers and a carton sit on top of a table surrounded on the right by a dark green wall and on the left by a grey wall with an open entrance. The painting looks as if it could have been influenced by French post-impressionism or the early studies of Richard Diebenkorn. Merely 28 by 20.2 centimeters in size, the painting nevertheless skillfully conveys the moody atmosphere of a rainy day. Another work, *Dormitory* (1976), depicts a low building with a tiled roof; a line of laundry hangs from the building and a neighbouring tree, and roosters peck at food in front of the house. The treatment and theme are unpretentious—which is exactly the point, for the Wuming believed art was most effective when communicating personal messages. A painting as directly descriptive as Ma Kelu's *Chrysanthemum and Blue Pot* (1974) might look purely academic to Western eyes, but the freedom taken in creating the image within the context of China at the time can be understood as having genuine consequence. Here, a chrysanthemum in a glass, a blue teapot, and a spoon on a saucer belong very much to the manner of Cézanne, whose early modern still-lifes were surely familiar to the artist.

Yan Li, *Records*, 1986, mixed media, 77.4 x 62.2 cm. Courtesy of China Institute, New York.

As the catalogue presents it, the Xingxing (Star-Star) association was particularly daring in its creation of a viable avant-garde that intended to both elude and confront the arbiters of artistic taste at the time. Coming from art academies in Hangzhou and Beijing, the Xingxing group consisted of an inner circle of five young men who initiated the association: Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, Yan Li, Qu Leilei, and Wang Keping. Eventually, however, the association would include more than thirty artists. The movement also formed a loose alliance with the advances of the literary scene; writer Zhong Acheng, for example, took part in the Xingxing movement. Poets too lent their support; one of the most famous of them, Bei Dao, was familiar with the artists, and a friendly exchange developed between him and the association. Bei Dao was also founder of *Today*, an important literary publication of the avant-garde whose art editor was Huang Rui.[5]

It was in 1979 that Xingxing's first exhibitions took place. Huang Rui and Ma Desheng initially tried to secure traditional venues such as the Huafangzhai Gallery, in Behai Park, but there was no room in the schedule

Top: Wang Keping, *Silent*, 1978, wood, 48 x 24 x 23 cm. Courtesy of China Institute, New York.

Bottom: Wang Keping, *Idol*, 1979, wood, 57 x 40 x 15 cm. Courtesy of China Institute, New York.

for their show. In July of the same year, the Wuming group mounted an exhibition of its own work—an event that succeeded in stimulating the Xingxing group to show no matter what. Huang Rui and Ma Desheng eventually found a small garden off to the side of the China National Art Gallery, in Beijing, which became the site of the show; the opening took place September 27, 1979. Some one hundred and twenty artworks were hung informally on the fence surrounding the garden. All kinds of work could be seen: oil paintings, ink paintings, woodblock prints, pen drawings, and sculptures. The exhibition was considered illegal by the officials; on the third day, posters promoting it were removed, and an official ban on the show was enacted. Both police and hired toughs harassed and intimidated the artists and those viewing the exhibition. Additionally, many paintings were confiscated. Eventually the art was returned, but the Xingxing took it upon themselves to hold a march protesting the behaviour of the officials and police, although they disbanded just minutes before the police would have arrested them. Finally, an officially sanctioned indoor show, at the Huafangzhai space, in Beijing, was installed on November 23. Eight thousand people visited on the first day.[6]

By the summer of 1980, the Xingxing Painting Society became official. Aside from the larger membership, more than a dozen artists now formed the core of the group.[7] Later in that year the Xingxing mounted a second show at the Chinese National Art Gallery (August 20 to September 4), which consisted of one hundred works of art. This exhibition included sculptor Wang Keping's notorious *Idol* (1979), a skillfully worked wood head of Mao with heavy jowls wearing a military cap with a star in its middle. Inscrutably shedding light upon the character of Mao, China's last emperor, *Idol* gives us an unflattering view of the political leader. Because the work suggests parody, the portrait must have been a great shock for the show's audience to see. This work was historically significant, being one of the first critical representations of Mao by a contemporary Chinese artist. *Silent* (1979) could not be more direct: A large wooden plug fills the mouth of a simply carved head. The sculpture's title gives us a unambiguous clue to its meaning. Wang Keping showed more than casual bravery in tackling two taboo topics: Mao's portrait and the persistence of political repression. Both of these sculptures show us that Wang Keping's considerable skills served political protest, which perhaps enlarges their artistic impact. Caricature is always dangerous in a repressive society, and so *Idol* is still considered courageous in ways that the cultural scene in America today would not easily understand.

Huang Rui's paintings reminded their viewers of a sense of place they most likely knew as children. One of the artist's works is titled *Childhood Memory* (1981); it is a light-coloured painting, consisting of tans and browns. Towards the middle of the painting are two small figures and a bicycle. Buildings are indicated by simple rectangles for walls and triangles for roofs, and while the work is painted in oil, it has the quality of a

Huang Rui, *Childhood Memory*, 1981, oil on canvas, 89.5 x 78.5 cm. Courtesy of China Institute, New York.

watercolour. The same is true for his *Forbidden City* (1979): a study of a pathway that begins inside one of the Forbidden City buildings, proceeds to move through to an outside courtyard, and then continues into another interior space. The walls and entranceways are painted a muted red; three figures in grey stand as sentinels. There is a sense of mystery in both of these works—with memory acting as a kind of provocateur. This moment of seeming cultural freedom, with its pluralism of artistic styles, was destined to be nullified by a reactionary period within government: In the fall of 1980, bureaucrats declared nudity in painting to be too sexual; unregistered publications such as *Today* were put out of business in 1981; and the major figures of the Xingxing association—Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, and Wang Keping—were denied the right to exhibit their art. Yet, in spite of this, the Xingxing members made great strides in the service of a more open cultural expression, an accomplishment all the more impressive for its lifespan of just two years.

Originating in Shanghai, the Caocao She (Grass Society) was created in order to justify the mounting of an exhibition in the fall of 1979. Initially conceived of as an artist's association, like the Wuming and the Xingxing groups, the Caocao She emphasized new ink painting—clearly a dismissal of socialist realism but, also, as the catalogue essay on the group states, a refusal of "the use of Chinese ink as an empty gesture of nationalism."[8] Unlike Beijing, a city remade by party members in favour of socialism,

Shanghai's art scene was shaped by older artists who kept alive the thought and skills of China's pre-Cultural Revolution culture. Shanghai, often more sophisticated and culturally advanced than Beijing, maintained an interest in subjective experience, a sense of the artist as an individual who advanced the unfettered artistic gesture.[9] These values also resulted in an ongoing interest in, if not an actual tie to, European modernist art. After the Cultural Revolution, when the Caocao She artists banded together, interest in art outside of Chinese culture made its way into the work of this new generation of artists. Just as Chinese artists traveled abroad in the 1920s and 30s, artists in the 80s, too, made their way out of China after the social tragedies of the Cultural Revolution.

This renewal of relatively liberal values reopened the door for older artists such as Guan Liang, Liu Haisu, Pan Sitong, Lei Yu, Fan Mingti, Zhu Ying, Zhu Qizhan, Li Yongsen, and Ran Xi, many of whom had not shown their work publicly in years. This resulted in an important show installed in 1977: a watercolour exhibition at the Xuhui District Cultural Center. Elder painters were exhibited alongside younger ones so that the audience could see the various styles of different generations. These artists, while not belonging to the Caocao She association, encouraged a creative space where independent styles and innovation could be nurtured. This show led to others: in 1978, the Wild Rose Exhibition, organized by students from the Shanghai Drama Academy, and in early 1979, The Twelve-Man Painting Exhibition, which took place at the Huangpu District Children's Palace. Interested in stylistic individualism, the artists showed "landscapes, still life, and figures from traditional theatre in a range of modern styles from Impressionism to Cubism."[10] Grass was seen to be a force in nature, growing in arid places, and its persistence was prized by the members of the group: Qiu Deshu, Chen Jialing, Yuan Songmin, Jiang Depu, Guo Runlin, Dai Dunbang, and Chen Juyuan.

In February 1980, the Caocao She group organized another show, The Grass Society: Painting Exhibition for the 1980s, which took place at the Luwan District Cultural Palace, in Shanghai. Authorities removed a nude and several abstractions by Qiu Deshu even before the show opened. But after a tour of the show that Qiu Deshu gave to Joan Lebold Cohen, an American art writer, news of her visit came to the attention of the propaganda department of the Shanghai Municipal Party Committee, which then placed tremendous pressure on the artist—he was under constant surveillance and public criticism was made of his character. At only thirty-two years old, he suffered a stroke, perhaps in response to the harassment, after which the exhibition itself closed within a few days. In response to the negative reaction by officials to the Caocao Shi, the group soon after disbanded.[11] Because the works of the association emphasized autonomy and abstraction, the artists who made them were suspected of a bourgeois liberalism unacceptable to the government. The attacks on the artists and art at the time were truly tragic, and it is perhaps difficult for an

outsider to understand why government officials would put so much effort into defining what was an unacceptable painting.

Qiu Deshu, the artist subjected to forced confessions and constant scrutiny, was a skilled ink painter working with abstraction. *Empty no. 1* (1982) consists of two columns, varying in darkness, that ascend towards the top of the paper. The larger column curls over and falls downward like a wave, ending in a spray of dots. Another work, *3–5 Times Shouting* (1980), is a small forest of thick and thin strokes punctuated by dots large and small. In both paintings we see the independence of an artist at work, similar to that of Jackson Pollock or Franz Kline. In some ways, a Western audience familiar with the New York School would find little innovation in these ink works; however, we must again remember that for the Chinese, in the context of just having recovered from the Cultural Revolution, a work like this was bold not only artistically but also politically. Even so, Qiu Deshu paid a price for his independence—he censored himself at this time by destroying much of his work. In terms of this group's acknowledgement of the tradition of Chinese ink painting, Chen Jialing's art from the same period addresses the past, but in this case the work of the seventeenth-century painter Zhu Da, known for his individualist approach, the beauty of his art, and his dissatisfaction with the rulers of the new dynasty.[12] Chen Jialing chose to approximate those values in his own art, and two works from 1980 consider the lotus leaf, a Buddhist emblem for purity. They feel contemporary, yet their historical allusion makes it clear that Chen Jialing's point carried political undertones as well. The notion that a painter could protest government rule by choosing particular themes in nature was part of Chinese art early on in its history.

Qiu Deshu, *3–5 Times Shouting*, 1980, ink on paper, 129.5 x 269.2 cm. Courtesy of China Institute, New York.

in Buddhist thought. The colour of the flowers ranges from brownish red to dark green to pink; the flowers cross the paper in daring angles that emphasize the blossoms and the long, thin stems. Much the same happens in *Two Pink Lotuses*, in which two black flowers, again on long stems, dominate the composition. Behind the blossom on the right is a pink flower, its colour contrasting sharply with the black form in front of it.

These paintings are sophisticated, sensitive, and educated works of art, and even in their reference to a pre-Cultural Revolution past, they assert the artist's self-reliance and autonomy, both as a painter and as a person.

The modernism of the Caocao Shi movement's theorist and writer, Chen Juyuan, resides in his acknowledgement of abstract expressionism. In fact, one work is simply named *Abstract Expression I* (1975); it is a dense and powerful composition done with ink and watercolour. Two white forms in the center of the painting hover over darker areas of colour; the feeling is slightly melancholic, with light- and dark-hued areas alternating, even competing with each other. *Abstract Expression II* (1975) has a white ring in the center, while areas of red, black, green, and yellow make up the rest of the space. It is a highly original work of art, one that looks to Western traditions of the last fifty years yet is not submissive to them.

Chen Jialing, *Two Pink Lotuses*, 1980, ink and colour on rice paper, 66 x 91.4 cm. Courtesy of China Institute, New York.

Although Blooming in the Shadows is installed in two small gallery spaces, it presents a good deal of information. The three art associations represented proved prophetic in their rejection of socialist realism and their interest in painting that had no obviously discernible politics. While the work varies from group to group, the intentions behind the art appear unified in their attempt to make art purely for art's sake. In their measured, highly informative essays, Julia F. Andrews and Kuiyi Shen draw a detailed scenario reflecting the dangers of making nonpolitical art at a time heavily dominated by ideology. The works themselves may be modest, but that is not the point; the artists' aim was to establish an imaginative space worthy of nature, architecture, and pure abstraction. The curators make the most of their limited gallery spaces, crowding paintings and sculptures into tight configurations. As for the work itself, it is clear that, under the

Chen Juyuan, *Abstract Expression II*, 1975, ink and watercolour on paper, 92 x 66 cm. Courtesy of China Institute.

circumstances, remarkable steps were taken to allow painting to simply remain painting, free of ideological constraint. Western viewers may well see the exhibition's works as slight, but they forget the courage it took these artists make them. At the same time, this historical moment was not without its aesthetic interest—the technical skill of much of the work is high, and the range of topics addressed shows an impassioned interest on the part of the artists.

Although most of the artists make no direct reference to politics, the psychic suffering of theorist and painter Qiu Deshu only underscores the terrible cost of independence in the years during and immediately following the Cultural Revolution. As a result, it is deeply moving to see these works of art, many of which represented a straightforward strategy of pure description. There is a paradox here in that when description by itself is sought, or, for that matter, when abstraction is claimed, the imagination can begin to lose the tendency to politicize art on a literal level—even when pursuing description and abstraction inherently carries the flag of independence in China's regulated society. In current terms, these artists' associations may seem quaint beside the gaudy work seen in many contemporary galleries today, whose money seems to have turned the heads of an entire generation of young artists. By comparison, then, the Wuming, the Xingxing, and the Caocao Shi groups start to look heroic in their efforts to remain autonomous. Their art bears witness to their courage and tenacity.

Notes

[1] Kuiyi Shen and Julia F. Andrews, *Blooming in the Shadows: Unofficial Chinese Art, 1974–1985* (New York: China Institute, 2011). The historical details recounted here and throughout this article are derived from the essays in the exhibition catalogue.

[2] Kuiyi Shen and Julia F. Andrews, "Art Underground: The Wuming (No Name), 1972–1983," in *Blooming in the Shadows*, 15.

[3] Quoted in ibid., 17.

[4] Ibid., 26.

[5] Kuiyi Shen and Julia F. Andrews, "Art on the Fence: The Xingxing (Star-Star) Group," in *Blooming in the Shadows*, 59–60.

[6] Ibid., 63–66.

[7] The core members included Huang Rui, Ma Desheng, Zhong Acheng, Li Youncun, Qu Leilei, Wang Keping, Ai Weiwei, Yan Li, Mao Lizi (Zhang Zhunli), Yang Yiping, Li Shuang, Shao Fei, Zhu Jinshi, Gan Shaocheng, Yin Guangzhong, and Zhao Gang.

[8] Kuiyi Shen and Julia F. Andrews, "Outsider Art in Shanghai: The Caocao She (Grass Society)," in *Blooming in the Shadows*, 97.

[9] Ibid., 97.

[10] Ibid., 99.

[11] Ibid., 102.

[12] Ibid., 110.